



Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, "that all may be one. . . as we are one" opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that **man**, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, **cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.**

- Gaudium et Spes, 24

CATHOLIC GUIDE TO COPING: PART 1

What is coping?

Simply put, coping is effectively handling a difficult experience. The tools or strategies we choose are means to that end.

What coping is NOT

Defense mechanisms are not coping, since they are not an effective way of handling a difficult situation. Defense mechanisms are a way to run away from or avoid the difficult experience instead of moving towards and through it.

Examples of common defense mechanisms include:

- Denial - refusing to acknowledge the difficulty
- Displacement - I am angry with my boss, but yelling at my spouse
- Rationalization - using logic and intellect to justify inappropriate behavior
- Avoidance - procrastinating or working excessively (unnecessarily) when there are difficulties at home
- Lack of Vulnerability - using patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors as a way to protect ourselves, like an armor. Examples of what this looks like include blaming, silent treatment, gossiping, defensiveness (not being open to feedback), and condescension
- Numbing - addictions like drugs, alcohol, and food; or process addictions like shopping, gambling, or internet (including inciting conflict on the internet)

It is important to note that we move towards difficulties in relationships that are safe. Abusive relationships are contrary to what the human person was made for, and different solutions are needed for individuals experiencing abuse.

Where does coping fit in living out our faith and striving for holiness?

Let's go back to the beginning. You are made in the image and likeness of God, which in part means that "man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." There is a saying, "I cannot offer something as a gift if it is not in my possession." In this sense, our common vocation to be saints and to live eternally with the Father in heaven is both an ongoing process of growing in self-donation and self-possession or self-mastery. Attending to our mental health and learning to deal effectively with difficult circumstances can help us show up more sincerely in our relationships. Our relationships (especially our vocational relationships) are where it is most important that we do our best to make a gift of ourselves. Remember, we are embodied, and so our bodies make invisible realities visible. Pope Saint John Paul II speaks at length about this in his *Theology of the Body*. Faithful and regular participation in the sacraments, accompanied by a life of prayer, are the foundation for living well. Having a coping plan helps us make the most of the graces received in the sacraments and increases the fruit of our prayer, which frees us to be more fully present in our relationships. I am a firm believer that when I reach the moment of my particular judgement, the conversation with Jesus will be mostly about how I loved in the relationships he gave me. How did I show up in those relationships? How did I make a gift of myself according to His will? Our coping plans should always lead to greater levels of self-donation and not selfishness, but be on guard against an emerging cultural trend I call "the tyranny of self-care" which can lead to self-indulgence. Our prayer life is vital to spiritual and mental health, but I caution those who say that an established prayer life should be sufficient for managing mental health difficulties. Prayer is about union with God. Union with God does not guarantee an immunity to mental health struggles or any other suffering for that matter.